

Document Citation

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Title | The life and adventures of Jiri Menzel |
| Author(s) | Mary Blume |
| Source | <i>International Herald Tribune</i> |
| Date | 1994 Mar 19 |
| Type | article |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 1 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | Zivot a neobycejna dobrodruzstvi vojaka Ivana Conkina (The life and extraordinary adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin), Menzel, Jirí, 1994 |

The Life and Adventures of Jiri Menzel

International Herald Tribune

PARIS — Back in the brazen 1960s, the filmmakers known as the Czech New Wave triumphed with work that was as anarchic in its way as more heated American and European films but that also had a mocking and pastoral tenderness. Then, in 1968, the Russian tanks rolled in. Such directors as Ivan Passer and Milos Forman

MARY BLUME

went West and lost something in translation. Jiri Menzel, whose "Closely Watched Trains" had won an Academy Award for best foreign film in 1967, stayed on and after making "Larks on a String" was banned from filmmaking for five years.

"Larks on a String," a comedy based on short stories set in 1950s Czechoslovakia, was finally released 20 years later and won a Golden Bear at the Berlin film festival. During his banishment from films, Menzel directed plays and acted. As one might suppose from a poker face that makes Buster Keaton look giggly, he specialized in comic roles.

He directed plays in Paris, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, Sweden and Yugoslavia and returned to films when the ban was lifted. In 1991 he directed the movie of Vaclav Havel's stage adaptation of "The Beggar's Opera" by John Gay.

Havel's play owed nothing to Brecht's version, which Menzel finds humorless and dry. "Havel showed how easy it is to misuse language, that's the motor of the piece. By the time he finished it, he was banned."

Havel, setting the play in 1920s Prague, emphasized the collusion between police and thieves. By the time Havel had been freed and elected as his country's president, the work had taken on resonances about the collusion between certain dissidents and the secret police, similar to that of East German intellectuals and the Stasi. "At the end, Havel made a speech saying I swear I wrote this play 16 years ago and not today."

In all, Menzel has seen a lot of politically induced time lags, so it is not surprising that his new film, "The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin," has been years in the making.

It is based on a Russian novel by Vladimir Voinovich that was smuggled out of the U.S.S.R. via the YMCA in Paris, as the works of Pasternak and Solzenitsyn were, and published in the West in 1969 ("The Soviet 'Catch 22' as written by a latter-day Gogol," said The New York Times). It has since been published in some 20 languages, including Japanese. Having made fun of the army, the party and the KGB, Voinovich lost his citizenship and moved to Munich. The book finally came out in Russia in 1989 and was praised for its "liberating power of laughter."

In London, the producer Eric Abraham was introduced to the novel by his wife, Katia Krausova, in 1986. It has taken seven years to pull off the production, six of them waiting for Menzel to be free.

The film is backed by Abraham's Portobello Pictures, as well as by French, Italian and Czech money and a Russian company with the unfortunate name of Trite.

Abraham took the bold decision of filming in Czechoslovakia with a Russian cast that Menzel describes as "the cream of cream" and in the Russian language. "I learned Russian at school because I had to," Menzel said. "In the past I did not always like the sound of the language, but from the actors in the film it sounds very pleasant."

The film, which will be shown at the Cannes festival in May, is set in 1941. Chonkin (Gennadi Nazarov) is a jug-



Corbett and Keene

Menzel (left) with Gennadi Nazarov, star of "The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin."

eared recruit sent by army bureaucrats to guard a downed Russian biplane in a remote village, and then forgotten. The village, with its thieving Communist leader, its vodka still hidden behind a party banner, and its plump and earthy young postmistress (Zoya Buryak), with whom Chonkin falls in love, serves as a microcosm and as a contrast to heartless officialdom.

The young couple is charming and the fact that the film is set on the eve of an atrocious war adds to its poignancy. "I hate war and I also hate war films because most war films love war," Menzel said.

"When I was a little boy, just after the war, there were many black-and-white films about Russian heroism. But I wanted to show that the war in the Soviet Union was not a victory against the Nazis but the start of a great tragedy. The regime betrayed the Russian military because it believed in Hitler until the very last minute. The Russian army was bigger than the German, but they had no arms." In the film, the addled army mistakes Chonkin for the enemy and attacks in arctic gear although it is full summer, their rifles lacking bullets. Chonkin and his girlfriend climb happily into the little airplane and fly away.

Now 55 and wearing the rosette of a French Officer of Arts and Letters ("No one in Prague knows what it is"), Menzel attended the famous FAMU film school, where

Milan Kundera taught comparative literature. The Czech New Wave, he says, gained strength from having to work under the constraints of the Communist regime.

"Now we can say everything. When you can say everything, there is nothing to say."

"There is too much stuff now that is sophisticated, quasi-intellectual, showing off. It's too bad, the same thing is happening in Germany and the result is that audiences prefer American films. The super-artistic wave is really dangerous."

The special brand of Czech humor — knowing and pointed, but without sarcasm — can be traced back to the violence following the Hussite movement of the 14th century, Menzel says. "Since then, there is official and unofficial thinking. Everyone learned to think two ways — to agree and to be subversive. Czechs are always skeptical. They know how to survive, it is in their blood."

The great Czech comic classic about the military is of course Jaroslav Hasek's "The Good Soldier Schweik." Why did Menzel choose to film the Voinovich novel instead? For one thing, "Schweik" has been filmed often and unsuccessfully, he says.

"It is too big, with not enough drama. Chonkin is more closed, even if the subject is bigger. And it has love and tenderness. I don't think Hasek liked people very much. Voinovich has a heart."